WOMAN'S ATHLETIC CLUB

626 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information
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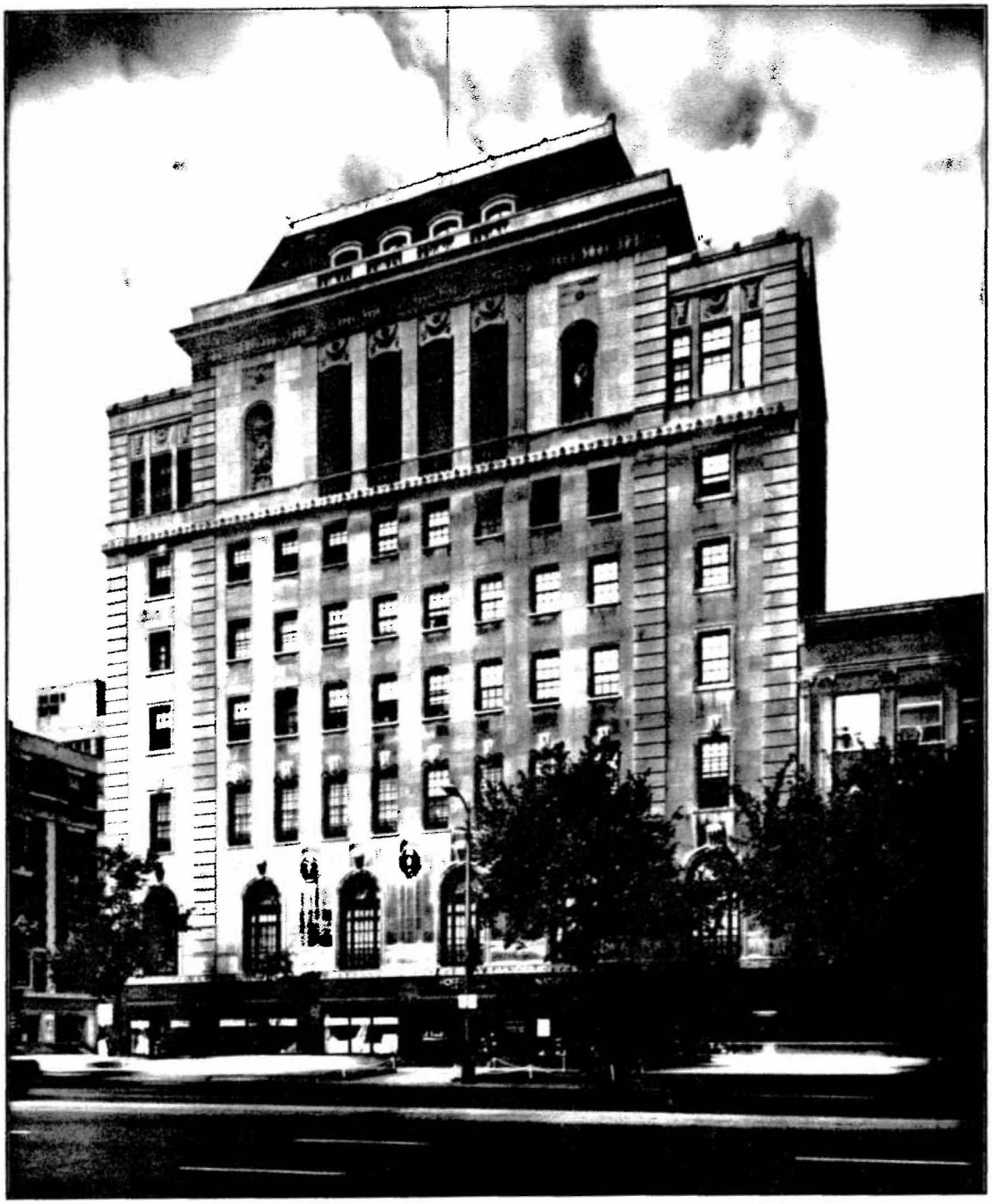
DATE: 1928
ARCHITECT: Philip Brooks Maher

Gracefully anchoring the northwest corner of North Michigan Avenue and Ontario Street is a building whose continental Parisian elegance was executed by Philip Maher in 1928 for the Woman's Athletic Club. Founded in 1898 and originally headed by Mrs. Philip Armour, the organization has the distinction of being the first athletic club for women in the nation. A member of North Michigan Avenue's first generation of premier architecture, the Woman's Athletic Club is one of the few remaining buildings which illustrate the character of the street as it was conceived and developed during the 1920s. City planners decreed a cosmopolitan ambience for North Michigan Avenue and Philip Maher was a master at achieving the desired look of sophisticated urbanity.

The Woman's Athletic Club and North Michigan Avenue

Located at 626 North Michigan Avenue, the Woman's Athletic Club carries one of Chicago's most eminent addresses. Almost every major metropolis has one select street that achieves worldwide prominence. As Fifth Avenue is to New York, Bond Street is to London, and the Rue de la Paix is to Paris, so too is North Michigan Avenue to Chicago. What, perhaps, few people realize is that North Michigan Avenue was, during the nineteenth century, a quiet, tree-shaded residential area lined with imposing Victorian mansions called Pine Street. By the early 1900s, it had degenerated into an unpaved road flanked by warehouses, soap factories, and breweries. But the span of time from the end of World War I until the onset of the Great Depression would witness the transformation of North Michigan Avenue into, as architectural historian John Stamper notes, "the city's most vital and prestigious commercial boulevard, containing some of its most significant architecture and urban planning features, exemplifying the business and economic conditions of a great era in Chicago's building history." Few decades have been so productive for Chicago, and few can be cited that made so distinctive a mark on the city.

One of Chicago's most outstanding accomplishments during the 1920s was the implementation of parts of Burnham and Bennett's Chicago Plan of 1909. Two important projects proposed in this historic document of urban planning led to the dynamic development of North Michigan Avenue. The foremost was the construction of a technologically advanced, double-leaf,



Built in 1928, the Woman's Athletic Club is one of the few remaining buildings along North Michigan Avenue that typify the character of this prestigious Chicago street as it was originally planned. *(Bob Thall, photographer)*

trunnion bascule bridge connecting the north and south sides of the Chicago River at Michigan Avenue. The second municipal improvement was the widening of Pine Street into a boulevard. The metamorphosis of Pine Street into North Michigan Avenue was distinguished by unusual examples of cooperation between the public and private sector. The nature of the street as an upscale locale was due almost exclusively to the spirit, energy, and vision of a group of area property owners who, in 1914, at the instigation of William N. Pelouze, formed the North Central Association (now the Greater North Michigan Avenue Association). The group had two equal and very valid concerns: what would be the architectural character and aesthetic calibre of the new structures to be built along this new commercial artery, and what would be the nature of the businesses housed there. In March of 1918, they invited property owners, real estate brokers, and others whose opinions and influence they considered essential to hear their proposals, as the reporter for *The Economist* relates:

> Plans are now taking shape by which North Michigan Avenue from Randolph Street north to Chicago Avenue will be converted into one of the most attractive and fashionable shopping thoroughfares in the world. Both sides of the thoroughfare, which will form a fashionable promenade, will be lined with the shops of milliners, modistes, gold and silver smiths, interior decorators, but no automobile service stations, factories, laundries, or saloons will be permitted. This is the idea now.

In order to assure the realization of their concept, the North Central Business Association commissioned a select committee of architects to formulate a plan for the proper improvement of the street. The chairman was Howard Van Doren Shaw and the managing architect was A. N. Rebori.The other members of the committee were: E. H. Bennett; Coolidge and Hodgdon; Graham, Anderson, Probst and White; Holabird and Roche; Jarvis Hunt; Marshall and Fox; George W. Maher; Mundie and Jensen; Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton; and Schmidt, Garden and Martin. Certainly the North Central Association had managed to assemble a formidable array of professional expertise for this group encompassed at that time the city's best known and most respected designers as well as the largest and most acclaimed architectural firms. Generously donating their services, the architects themselves saw this not only as an honor but a singular opportunity, a viewpoint they expressed in the preface to the presentation of their final plans:

> This work of the Architects' Committee may appropriately be termed an experiment in architectural eugenics, since it is an effort to influence the architectural character of a street before its birth; or at least its rebirth as a boulevard.

The architects judged that this undertaking might not be only of local consequence or parochial influence. Andrew Rebori expressed the view that,"no such opportunity has presented itself in the history of the world, unless it was in that of the rebuilding of Paris." This was in reference to the consummate achievement of Georges Eugene, Baron Haussmann (1809-1891) whose work as Prefet of the Seine Department under Napoleon III made the Paris of the Second Empire such a notable urban masterpiece. It was this celebrated example that Chicago's architects optimistically hoped to emulate. In the final analysis, the plans of this committee were fairly flexible. While they did suggest building heights of no more than a dozen stories and uniform cornice lines, they did not venture to address considerations such as color or texture, detailing or

embellishment, or appropriate architectural style. As construction progressed along North Michigan Avenue during the 1920s, the recommendations of the Architects' Committee were not always followed. Nevertheless, the good sense of their proposals was not ignored. In fact, a significant number of North Michigan Avenue's first buildings, many of them designed by the members of the committee, adhered at least to the spirit if not the letter of the Architects' Committee formula. In reviewing the history of North Michigan Avenue in a *Chicago Tribune* article in 1984, architectural critic Paul Gapp noted:

> Architects did not stick to the letter of the 1918 plan, but they managed to sustain a classy look. Many architectural styles were employed in the 1920s buildings, but for the most part the designers managed to achieve a feeling of harmony of buildings displaying themselves in ensemble form.

The Drake Hotel by Marshall and Fox, the Wrigley Building of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, and the Michigan Square Building (located at 540 North Michigan Avenue and housing the Diana Court lobby; the building was demolished in 1973), just one of Holabird and Roche's Michigan Avenue designs, exemplify the calibre of the Chicago architects' contributions. Other than Holabird and Roche, no other architect received more commissions for North Michigan Avenue construction than Philip Brooks Maher. While not a member of the 1918 Architects' Committee himself, Philip Maher was the son of one of its more distinguished members, the noted Prairie School residential designer, George W. Maher.

The Architect Philip Maher

Philip Brooks Maher was born on October 12, 1894 in Kenilworth, Illinois. After graduation from the University of Michigan he traveled in England, France, and Italy. Further opportunity to observe firsthand the cities of Paris and London was provided during his wartime service career when he was stationed at the naval headquarters in London and, after the armistice, with the commission to negotiate peace in Paris. His architectural practice began in partnership with his father, and he established his own firm in 1924 with offices at 157 East Erie Street. His early reputation rested on his designs for the Chicago Town and Tennis Club, 1925 West Thome, the Glencoe Women's Club, and numerous residences in the North Shore suburbs. As well as the Woman's Athletic Club, Maher's most notable designs for North Michigan Avenue included the Farwell Building, 664 North Michigan Avenue (1926-27); Malabry Court, 671-73-75 North Michigan Avenue (1926-28); Decorative Arts Building, 620 North Michigan Avenue (1926-28); the Jacque Shop, 545 North Michigan Avenue (1928); and the Blackstone Shop, 669 North Michigan Avenue (1929). Maher's best-known residential designs are the cooperative apartment buildings at 1260 and 1301 North Astor Street, respectively 1931 and 1932, which were sponsored by some of Chicago's leading citizens including Potter Palmer, John Winterbotham, and J. Sterling Morton. These cooperatives were unique in Chicago as they were so organized that buyers purchased loft space and utilities cooperatively but contracted separately for interior plans and decoration. Maher's career also included public buildings such as the Gary, Indiana, City Hall, hospitals for the State of Illinois, college buildings, and acting as a consultant on a number of federal government projects. A respected member of the American Institute of Architects, Maher was awarded a fellowship in 1940. At the time of his death in 1981 at the age of 87, Maher was living in the house his father had built at 424 Warwick Road in Kenilworth.

The wealth of decorative detail on the Woman's Athletic Club illustrates Philip Maher's imaginative use of classically inspired ornamentation. *(Photograph by Terry Tatum for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)*

Philip Maher's Architectural Style and the Woman's Athletic Club

Architectural styles prevalent in the first four decades of the twentieth century can generally be divided into two categories: the academic and the progressive. The Progressives rejected historical revival styles and sought to initiate new forms which they considered more appropriate to the times. The Prairie School of Frank Lloyd Wright exemplifies this trend. As an architect affiliated with the Prairie School and noted for his highly personal interpretation of several architectural ideas and styles, George Maher, Philip's father, can be classified as a Progressive. Philip Maher, in contrast, falls in the academic mode and eclectically used a wide variety of historical forms and styles. However, architects working in this tradition were not merely copyists. Rather, they employed considerable discrimination even within a framework of historical prototypes or motifs. Architectural historian William H. Jordy explains:

> First, of course, he had freedom in selecting his style (Renaissance or Gothic, for example); then he had freedom to work eclectically within the chosen style (in Renaissance design, perhaps a fragment from the Palazzo Medici combined with another from the Giralda); freedom to invent or adapt (a Renaissance window enframement adjusted to the demands of a plate-glass store window); freedom even to create (a "modernized" variant of a Renaissance detail).

Furthermore, academic architects, often influenced by or trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, were imbued with a sensitivity to the urban environment, acknowledging that buildings should be incorporated into an orderly, harmonious cityscape.

Philip Maher's North Michigan Avenue buildings illustrate the academic approach. For instance, for the Decorative Arts Building Maher chose the Georgian Revival style as this structure originally housed the Erskine-Danforth Corporation, then the leading manufacturer of English eighteenth century and early American furniture. The Malabry Court combination of shops and apartments was treated in two French-inspired fashions as its name referred to an old and beautiful chateau near Paris which had been used as a military headquarters during the First World War. The dignified French Directoire style was used on the ground-floor store fronts while the second-floor apartments were treated in the French Provincial manner, more suited to the intimate atmosphere created by their configuration around a courtyard. As architectural historian John Stamper noted, "Maher was especially adept at handling a wide range of styles, which he could use to create individualized commercial settings to the needs of a particular client."

Both father and son did share a number of similarities. Each had a highly developed sense of and appreciation for the value of ornament. Both proved to have an aptitude for interior design and decoration as well as pure architecture. In fact, the senior Maher became famous for his "motif-rhythm theory" in which he repeatedly used a single decorative pattern, such as an indigenous Midwest flower, as a unifying factor. On North Michigan Avenue, Philip Maher designed both the exterior and interior of the Blackstone Shop, an especially elegant emporium that women's clothier Stanley Korshak modeled after New York's fashionable Bergdorf Goodman. Maher, who always kept himself abreast of the latest European trends, was by this time receptive to the prevailing modernism of Art Deco. The furniture Maher designed for the Blackstone Shops was sleek and modern, of gray wood and green satin, yet with lines that harked back to the eighteenth-century French Directoire. As decorative arts historian Sharon Darling summarized, "When called upon to design furniture, Maher skillfully blended clean lines and smooth surfaces

with classical detailing." That statement applies equally well to the buildings Maher designed and is especially true of the Woman's Athletic Club.

For the club, Maher drew inspiration from the grandeur of Paris during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1870), historically classified as the Second Empire. The Mansard roof, central pavilion, and tall arched first-floor windows are hallmarks of this style. Rising nine stories, the building is principally clad in smooth-faced gray Bedford limestone with polished black granite facing the ground floor balanced by the charcoal gray shingles of the roof. The main body of the Michigan Avenue elevation is eight bays wide, flanked by single window bays separated by finely incised quoins. In keeping with the European tradition, rooms reserved for more public social occasions were located on the second floor, referred to as the *bel etage* in French or the *piano nobile* in Italian. Large arched windows, two-story in height, and fronted by wrought-iron balconnettes, denote this space on North Michigan Avenue as does a graceful Palladian window on the Ontario Street facade. The seventh and eighth floors, which house the ballroom where dances, weddings, and debutante parties were held, likewise features grand windows encased with Doric pilasters. Above the windows are carved stone panels with swags of drapery and rosettes marking the festive nature of the celebratory activities held within.

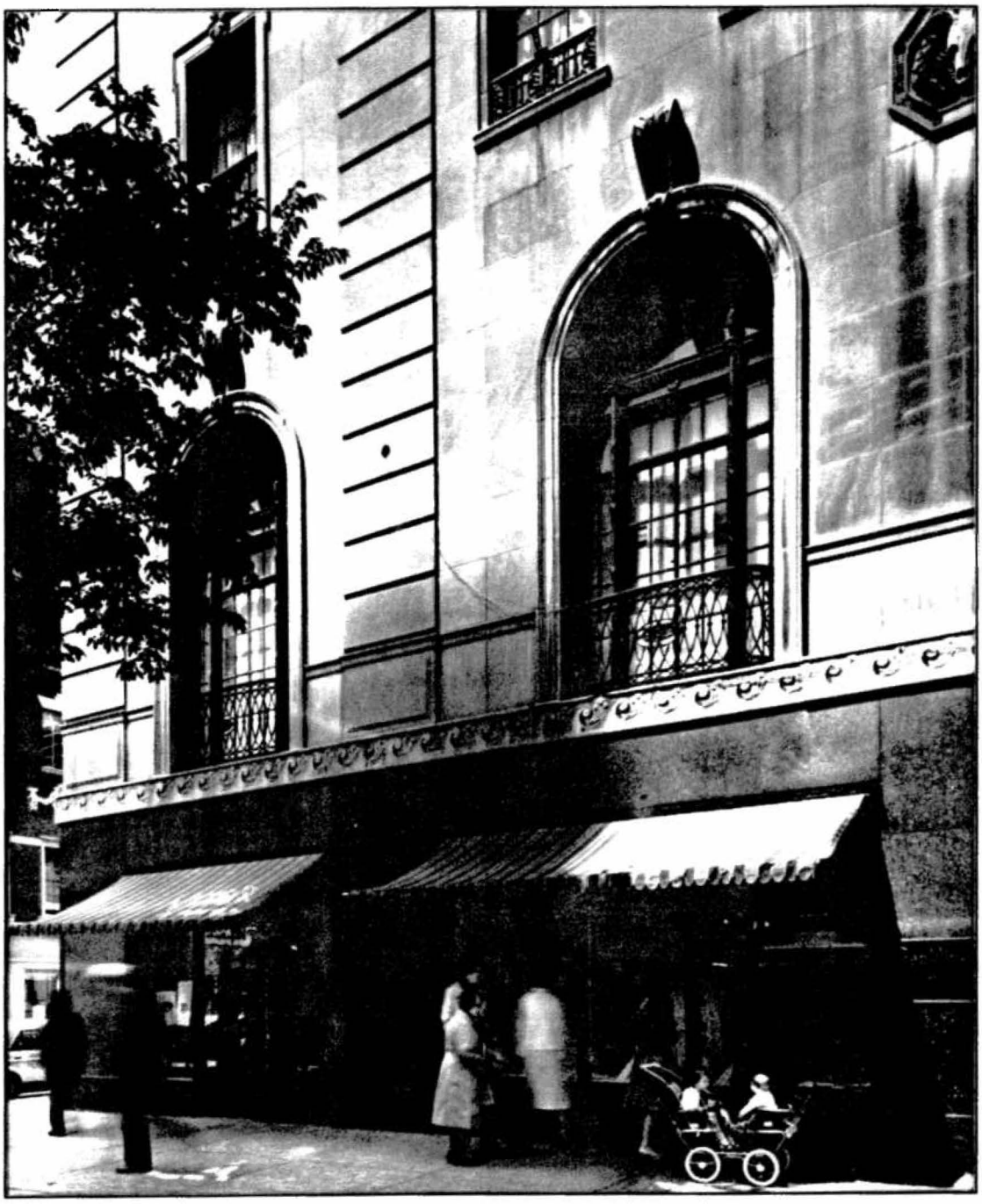
From the vast vocabulary of classical ornament, Maher chose only a relative few devices to detail the club. For the stringcourse separating the first and second floors, Maher chose a Vitruvian scroll, a running spiral pattern like a series of waves. Bands of anthemion in various sizes, a pattern based on the Greek honeysuckle, are the common configuration of the other stringcourses as well as the copper cresting on the Mansard roof. The acanthus, a Mediterranean plant whose deeply serrated leaf was stylized by the Greek and Romans to become one of the principal motifs of classical ornament, punctuates the center of the third floor windows. A spiral scroll known as a volute is used for the keystone of the arch of the second floor windows and the volute is again embellished with the acanthus leaf. Turning from natural to animal themes, Maher employs bucrane, ox skulls with garland-festooned horns, and griffins, fierce winged animals perched in arched niches flanking the rooftop ballroom.

In 1979, Philip Maher was interviewed by Jethro Hurt, then Educational Coordinator for the Chicago Architecture Foundation, who asked the architect if he would characterize the Woman's Athletic Club as Art Deco or "Faintly French." Maher replied:

> At that time, modern feeling was beginning to creep into design. I felt that a more traditional design was more appropriate to a woman's club. The choice resulted in an awful lot of carving, but then, that was the trend of fifty years ago.

In point of fact, Maher's design is a melding of the contemporary and the classic. Its debt to French architecture is obvious and a subtle compliment to his client. The members of the Woman's Athletic Club were from among Chicago's wealthiest families, well-educated and well-traveled, and therefore knowledgeable about and appreciative of the most urbane architectural traditions. Further, the building's European origins make a fitting statement about the distinctly non-provincial nature of the street on which it fronts. What is contemporary about the building is the way Maher has handled the ornament. Leaving the intermediate zone sleekly somber, the ornament has been relegated to where it can be seen to the most advantage, at the ground level and at the top. This was in keeping with the 1920s Art Deco philosophy. Architecture was not just for the owner. The general public was meant to enjoy it also, to be enticed, even elevated by it.

Prior to acquiring new headquarters, the Woman's Athletic Club had been located in the Harvester Building at 606 South Michigan Avenue and first contemplated a move to the new office



In keeping with the cosmopolitan character of North Michigan Avenue, fashionable shops occupy the majority of the ground floor of the Woman's Athletic Club. *(Bob Thall, photographer)*

building at 333 North Michigan Avenue designed by Holabird and Roche and built in 1928. Negotiations were abandoned, however, when the club realized that the proposed space would be inadequate and that being housed in a commercial structure would not give the club an identity of its own. A new search was initiated under the direction of Helen Thompson Pelouze, sister of Chicago's Mayor William Hale Thompson and wife of William N. Pelouze, member of Chicago's Plan Commission.

The club entered into an agreement for the site at the corner of Ontario Street and North Michigan Avenue, signing a ninety-nine year lease with its owner, John V. Farwell, son of one of Chicago's pioneering merchants and early Pine Street resident. With the family wholesale drygoods business sold in 1925 to Carson Pirie Scott and Company, John and his brother Arthur L. became active in Chicago real estate. 664 North Michigan Avenue, built in 1926 at the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Erie Street, was also a Philip Maher-designed, Farwell family enterprise. The transaction for the Woman's Athletic Club was handled by Frederick M. Bowes, a vice-president of the North Central Association and a realtor with wide experience in North Michigan Avenue properties. Although the lease called for progressively increasing rents, the document did include an option for the club to purchase the property, and the club obtained full title in 1986.

Subtle distinctions differentiate the Woman's Athletic Club from the usual private club. Despite a Michigan Avenue address, the main entrance to the club is located on the side street. Except for the entrance, foyer, and elevators, the entire ground floor is Michigan Avenue storefronts. The swimming pool is in the basement. All these provisions were shrewdly stipulated by John Farwell who wanted to be certain that the building could quickly be converted into offices and basement storage space, should the Woman's Athletic Club ever move out. Fine establishments have traditionally occupied the Woman's Athletic Club building, testifying to the continuing drawing power of Michigan Avenue as the preeminent retail venue. In March of 1929, *The Economist* reported a lease to Martha Leslie, a millinery and clothing store who would be moving from Diversey Parkway as well as the importer Harry Weiner who relocated from the Edgewater Beach Hotel. Two months later, the same newspaper reported the opening of Beach & Geils, a candy shop with other Chicago and suburban locations. Just as today, the economic vitality of North Michigan Avenue mandated a presence for any upwardly mobile business.

The Woman's Athletic Club in the History of Women's Institutions

In 1873, when Chicago's first women's club, the Fortnightly, was founded, only a handful of women's clubs existed across the United States. By 1898, when the Woman's Athletic Club was founded, the number had grown to over two thousand, and that same year they banded together in a national federation of which a Chicagoan, Mrs. Charles Henrotin, was president. By the late 1890s, Chicago had thirty-two clubs for women with a variety of purposes that ranged from intellectual and cultural enlightenment to social and civic reform as well as philanthropy and political suffrage. The Woman's Athletic Club, however, broke new ground in being the first women's club not just in Chicago but in the nation, whose sole purpose was purely physical self-improvement. At first glance, physical culture would seem a rather superficial, narcissistic motivation especially in contrast to the rather more lofty goals of the other women's organizations. A guiding Victorian principle, however, was that a *mens sana* must inevitably reside in every *corpore sano*. In the 1890s just as in the 1990s, the pursuit of physical excellence was deemed a laudable societal goal for both men and women.

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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Staff for this publication

Meredith Taussig, *research and writing*

Survey Documentation: 42nd Ward

Elaine Batson
Terry Tatum
Timothy Wittman

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Room 516
320 North Clark Street
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(312) 744-3200